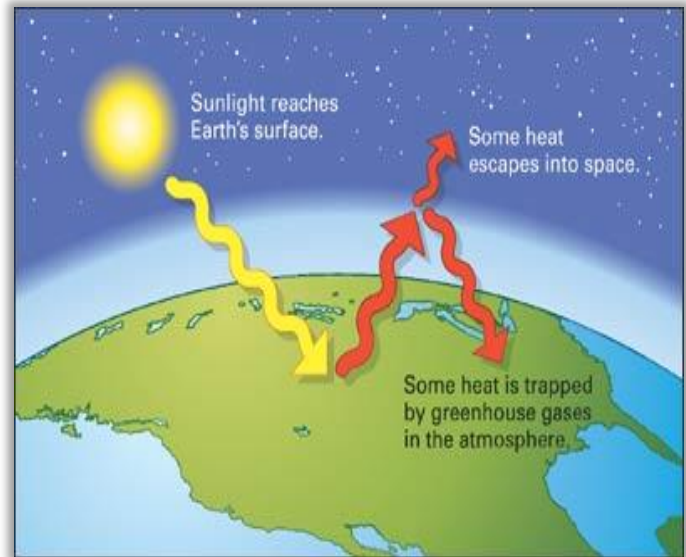


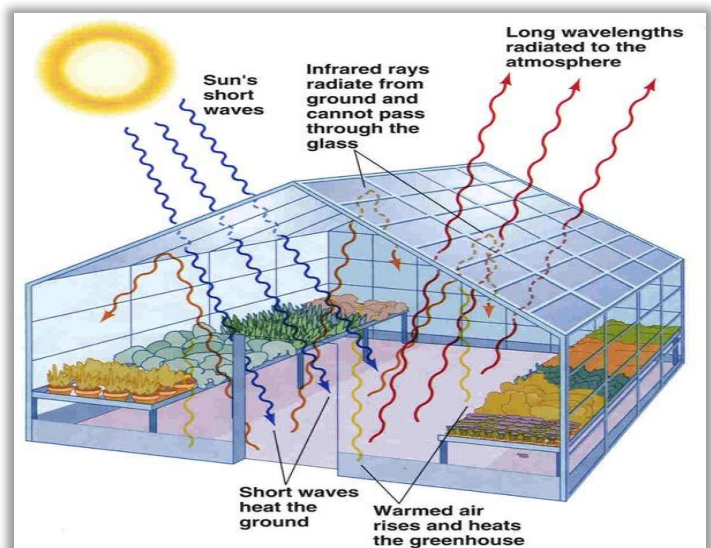
TEACHER BACKGROUND: THE GREENHOUSE EFFECT



The Sun powers Earth's climate, radiating energy at very short wavelengths, predominately in the visible or near-visible (ultraviolet) part of the spectrum. About one-third of the solar energy that reaches the top of Earth's atmosphere is reflected directly back to space. The remaining two-thirds is absorbed by the surface and by the atmosphere. To balance the absorbed incoming energy, the Earth must, on average, radiate the same amount of energy back to space. Because the Earth is much colder than the Sun, it radiates at much longer wavelengths, primarily in the infrared part of the spectrum. Much of this thermal radiation, emitted by the land and ocean, is absorbed by the atmosphere, and reradiated back to Earth. This is called the **greenhouse effect**.



The glass walls in a greenhouse reduce airflow and increase the temperature of the air inside. Similarly, but through a different physical process, the Earth's greenhouse effect warms the surface of the planet. Without the natural greenhouse effect, the average temperature at Earth's surface would be below the freezing point of water. Thus, Earth's natural greenhouse effect makes life as we know it possible. However, human activities, primarily the burning of fossil fuels and clearing of forests, have greatly intensified the natural greenhouse effect, causing global warming.

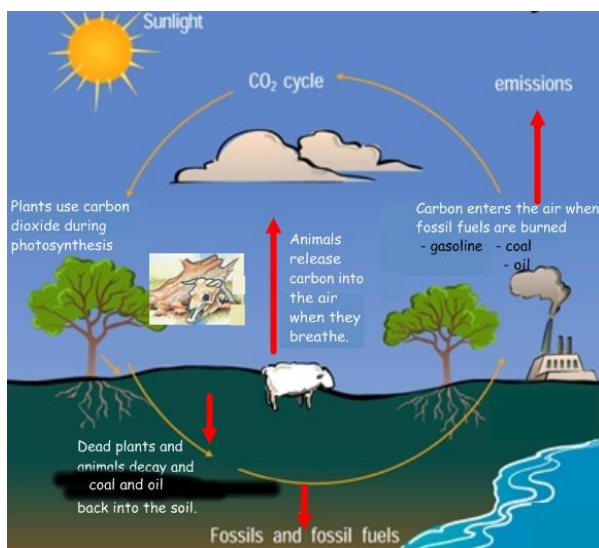
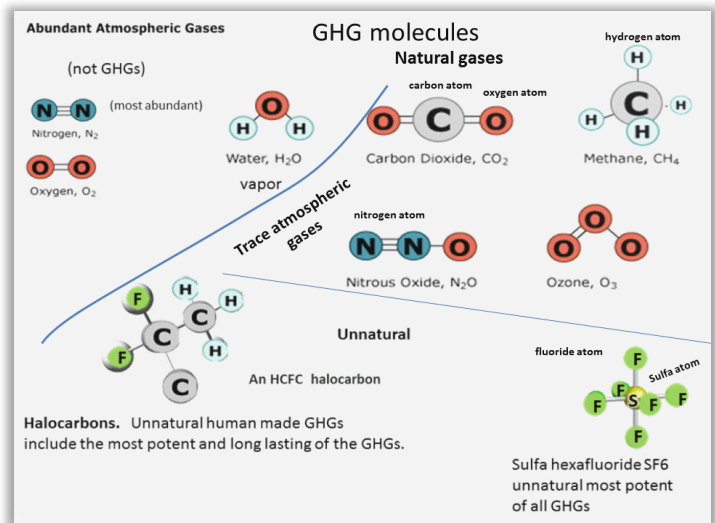


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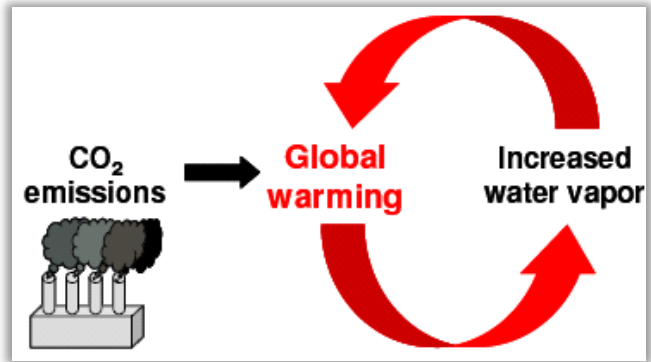
The two most abundant gases in the atmosphere, nitrogen (78%) and oxygen (21%), exert almost no greenhouse effect. Instead, the greenhouse effect comes from molecules that are more complex and much less common. Water vapor is the most important greenhouse gas, and carbon dioxide (CO_2) is the second-most important one.

Methane, nitrous oxide, ozone and several other gases present in the atmosphere in small amounts also contribute to the greenhouse effect. In the humid equatorial regions, where there is so much water vapor in the air that the greenhouse effect is very large, adding a small additional amount of CO_2 or water vapor has only a small direct impact on downward infrared radiation. However, in the cold, dry polar regions, the effect of a small increase in CO_2 or water vapor is much greater. The same is true for the cold, dry upper atmosphere where a small increase in water vapor has a greater influence on the greenhouse effect than the same change in water vapor would have near the surface.



Several components of the climate system, notably the oceans and living things, affect atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases. A prime example of this is plants taking CO_2 out of the atmosphere and converting it (and water) into carbohydrates via photosynthesis. In the industrial era, human activities have added greenhouse gases to the atmosphere, primarily through the burning of fossil fuels and clearing of forests.

Adding more of a greenhouse gas, such as CO_2 , to the atmosphere intensifies the greenhouse effect, thus warming Earth's climate. The amount of warming depends on various feedback mechanisms. For example, as the atmosphere warms due to rising levels of greenhouse gases, its concentration of water vapor increases, further intensifying the greenhouse effect. This in turn causes more warming, which causes an additional increase in water vapor, in a self-reinforcing cycle. This water vapor feedback may be strong enough to approximately double the increase in the greenhouse effect due to the added CO_2 alone.



Additional important feedback mechanisms involve clouds. Clouds are effective at absorbing infrared radiation and therefore exert a large greenhouse effect, thus warming the Earth. Clouds are also effective at reflecting away incoming solar radiation, thus cooling the Earth. A change in almost any aspect of clouds, such as their type, location, water content, cloud altitude, particle size and shape, or lifetimes, affects the degree to which clouds warm or cool the Earth. Some changes amplify warming while others diminish it. Much research is in progress to better understand how clouds change in response to climate warming, and how these changes affect climate through various feedback mechanisms.

